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ABSTRACT

There is continuous debate about which word recognition techniques should be taught, especially to early primary grade pupils. All learning activities provided in reading instruction should: (1) be meaningful; (2) have perceived purpose; (3) be interesting; (4) stress understandings, skills, and affective goals; (5) provide for individual differences among learners; and (6) be sequential. Individualized reading is advocated by whole language reading instruction, wherein the student reads an entire book, asks the teacher or another pupil how to pronounce unknown words, then talks with the teacher about the book. Some reading teachers favor highly analytical procedures, thus a primary grade teacher may use entire textbooks containing sequential lessons in phonics, beginning with the abstract, sound/symbol relationships, moving toward ideas and illustrations in the story. In whole language, pupils start with the ideas read and then may receive some instruction in phonics when analyzing content. What children learn about literacy is also heavily influenced by the expectations, skills, and concerns that parents, teachers, and principals share. Emerging literacy is a mutual product of the home and school environments acting together with common interests. (CR)

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WHICH WORD RECOGNITION TECHNIQUES SHOULD BE TAUGHT?

ED 402 564

There is continuous debate about which word recognition techniques should be taught, especially to early primary grade pupils. A reading teacher who is a strong advocate of whole language approaches in teaching may greatly minimize procedures for learners to know and do involving unlocking unknown words through analysis. Thus a whole language reading teacher believes in holistic approaches in having pupils secure ideas from reading. Gestalt psychology is involved here. The whole is greater than the parts or the sum of the parts. Thus teachers perceive the act of reading in terms of content and subject matter to acquire from the act of reading. The interests of learners in ideas to be read will take care of the deficiencies in recognizing unknown words. Pupils hurdle these difficulties when reading content in context. Words become familiar then when pupils relate the rest of the words in the sentence with the unknown word in context. Learners may also know what is unknown in terms of words through predicting what will come next. Accurate predictions assist pupils in recognizing an unknown word as the process of reading is continued. If the unknown word was not recognized initially through prediction, reading on further will straighten out whatever the pupil did not understand.

Before discussing the whole language versus phonics debate in the teaching of reading, all learning activities provided in reading instruction should follow guidelines provided by the psychology of learning as emphasized by educational psychologists. Pertaining to these guidelines, Ediger (1995) listed the following:

1. Learnings need to be meaningful.
2. Learnings need to have perceived purpose.
3. Learning needs to be interesting.
4. Learning activities to be emphasized need to stress understandings, skills, and affective goals.
5. Experiences and activities need to provide for individual differences among learners.
6. Learnings need to be sequential.

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Whole Language Reading

There are several procedures which advocate whole language reading instruction. I will focus on one procedure — individualized reading. Individualized reading stresses selected philosophical tenets. First, there needs to be an adequate supply of library books on different topics and diverse reading levels so that a pupil may choose a book to read that is of interest and on the appropriate reading level. There are two dimensions involved in pupils choosing a library book to read in an individualized reading program — personal interest and the instructional, not frustrational, level of reading. Holism is involved in that the learner selects the library book for reading, from among others available. The pupil reads the entire contents of the library book. He/she may ask the teacher or another pupil how to pronounce unknown words. Otherwise, a holistic experience or reading the entire book should be in evidence to enjoy and obtain ideas.

After the completion of reading the library book, the pupil has a conference with the teacher, as do other pupils in sequence. The conference stresses pupils telling favorite happenings read in the library book. The teacher may ask the learner questions covering subject matter read. The learner might read orally a self chosen selection from the library book to the teacher. In this way the teacher may notice problems, if any, faced by the pupil in reading. The teacher may record strengths and weaknesses of a pupil in reading the library book. Following the conference, the pupil may choose the next sequential library book to read.

There should be opportunities for pupils in a committee who have read the same paperback to have a group conference with the teacher. This may cause problems if there are not enough copies of a specific library book available.

To reiterate, the following is in evidence here pertaining to holism in reading instruction:

1. The pupil individually selects a library book to read.
2. The entire book is read with minimal assistance for others.
3. Word recognition techniques are not taught during the period of

time devoted to silent reading.

4. Following the completion of having read the library book, a conference is held with the teacher. The conference should cover pupil comprehension toward holistic ideas contained in the reading.

5. There is some analysis of proficiency in word recognition and comprehension of ideas by learners. Thus, when listening to pupils read orally a selection from the library book being discussed, the teacher may notice and diagnose pupil difficulty in reading such as in word recognition and comprehension skills.

Analytical Approaches in Reading Instruction

There are teachers who favor highly analytical procedures in the teaching of reading. Thus a primary grade teacher may use entire textbooks containing sequential lessons in phonics. Lessons contained in the textbook attempt to pinpoint specific grapheme/phoneme relationships that pupils need to master to become proficient readers. Perhaps, there is considerable drill and practice here on sound/symbol relationships to guide pupils to become good readers at a later time.

There are phonics programs of instruction that correlate with objectives and learning activities within the framework of basal reader use. These lessons in phonics stress relating sound/symbol relationships of selected words with stories read in the basal reader. There are teachers who introduce new words in a story by printing these in neat manuscript letters on the chalkboard. The new words are taught to pupils by going over the correct pronunciation of each as well as having learners attach meaning to these vocabulary terms. Learners are then asked questions such as the following pertaining to the new words on the chalkboard:

1. Are there words that you see that begin with the same letter?
2. Do these words that begin with the same letter also have the same sound?
3. Did you notice words that end with the same letter?

4. Do these ending letters have the same sound?

5. Are there any silent letters in these words on the chalkboard?

6. Do you see letters that do not make their own sounds? An example is "ph" making an "f" sound as in phone.

7. Are there two letters in any word that make a single sound? An example here is "th" as in though.

8. What other things do you see as you look at the words printed on the chalkboard?

Generally, such as in sequential lessons on phonics, pupils start with the abstract, sound/symbol relationships, and move toward the semiconcrete and the concrete including ideas and illustrations contained in the story. In whole language procedures of teaching reading, pupils start with the ideas read and then might receive some instruction in phonics when analyzing content into component parts such as in chosen words in phonics.

Issues in Teaching Phonics

There are selected issues that need resolving when heavy emphasis is placed upon phonics instruction, particularly for primary grade pupils. One issue pertains to how much phonics should be taught. There is an assumption on the part of selected teachers that primary grade pupils need a comprehensive program of phonics instruction prior to beginning actual reading. Student teachers and cooperating teachers whom I have supervised in the last thirty years provide the following assumptions based on a strong phonics curriculum:

1. once pupils have knowledge and skills involving phonics, the act of reading is easier since pupils can then unlock new words independently. The pupil then may look at letters and words and through grapheme/ phoneme relationships unknown words are identified.

2. phonics instruction in appropriate scope and sequence provides pupils with confidence in recognizing new words.

3. little assistance is needed in actual reading of new and familiar materials if the pupil has mastered key phonetic elements.

4. more attention may be placed upon reading for ideas once phonics learnings have become a part of the repertoire of the learner.

5. the English language is consistent enough between symbol and sound to warrant spending much time in phonic instruction.

6. independent readers have needed skills and abilities to sound out unknown words for identification.

7. in most cases if a pupil recognizes the initial sound of an unknown word and uses context clues, the learner can identify unknown words.

8. good teachers testify time and time again of the need to teach much phonics so that pupils become independent in word recognition.

Very few teachers view phonics instruction as a way to provide for individual differences. When a teacher provides for individual differences, there are certain pupils who will need more instruction in phonics as compared to other learners. Most teachers view phonics instruction as an either/or situation. Either pupils need a thorough scope and sequence program in phonics instruction or they do not. The feeling that some need much less in phonics instruction as compared to others does not, seemingly, enter the minds of many reading teachers. I have observed pupils who read well and still receive much instruction in phonics.

Those who oppose a strong scope and sequence program in phonics provide the following reasons from student teachers and cooperating teachers whom I supervised:

1. pupils spend too much time on word analysis and too little time on focusing on ideas read.

2. the act of reading becomes slow and laborious when identifying sound/symbol relationships becomes a major objective of reading subject matter.

3. concentration on content read is the goal of reading, not noticing sound/symbol relationships.

4. phonics instruction should be a tool for reading not an end in and of itself.

5. learners achieve phonics goals in context, not separate from the act of reading.

Issues in Whole Language Reading Instruction

Teachers, whom I supervise, advocating a strong whole language approach in teaching reading stress the following:

1. reading involves wholeness in that ideas are read sequentially by learners.

2. the wholeness involved in reading should not be interrupted with phonics or other word recognition techniques. Obtaining ideas, not phonics, is salient in reading.

3. interest in reading generates motivation to learn; interest overcomes problems in word recognition. Much reading then assists pupils to identify an increased number of words.

4. providing assistance to pupils, as needed, is sufficient for learners to recognize unknown words. This, as needed approach, also prevents pupils from fragmenting content read in reading.

5. learner enjoyment in reading needs to be whole, not segmented into parts.

Toward the other end of the continuum, student teachers and cooperating teachers whom I supervised believed that whole language approaches are more suited toward those pupils who can read well, such as in recreational reading. These pupils can sequence their very own reading materials at a personal, optimal rate of speed. Little assistance is then needed in identifying unknown words. Teachers here, however, agree that selected pupils do use context clues heavily to identify unknown words. Since pupils are different one from another, it stands to reason that some pupils will be oriented toward the whole language approach in teaching reading. With gestalt psychology, there are pupils who see the whole of something rather than the parts. Perhaps, the same learners perceive parts after the whole has be seen. In providing for individual differences, there are selected pupils who may well need a whole language approach in reading achievement.

Stimulus-Response (S-R) psychology stresses learning from parts and then achieving broader ideas in reading instruction.

Most of the student teachers and cooperating teachers I supervised believed the following in weaknesses pertaining to whole language procedures in teaching reading:

1. there are to many pupils who are left with no techniques in the repertoire to unlock unknown words if whole language procedures fail. Phonics instruction will give pupils an approach to sound out parts within an unknown word and thus be able to recognize it.

2. interest in reading can go side by side including both whole language and phonics instruction. Emphasizing phonics instruction can be taught in an interesting way together with stressing interest in reading subject matter. The philosophies and psychologies used in teaching will ensure more of selecting interesting learning activities, in general, than will the issue of phonics being uninteresting and content read is interesting.

3. pupil knowledge of syntax in whole language procedures may assist in identifying sequential words and content. However, there are too many words that fit in when reading syntactically that do not give the exact unknown word needed.

4. most reading experts agree that a balance needs to be found between whole language and phonics methods of teaching. The two approaches provide balance in word recognition in that if one procedure fails, the other approach might well fill the vacuum.

5. there are too many individual words that need identification in whole language instruction. If phonics is stressed, the pupil then has keys – sounds and symbols— to unlock unknown words.

In Conclusion

How reading should be taught appears to be an individual matter, according to that which is beneficial to the learner. Even if research results would indicate that one procedure — phonics versus whole language — is better for a given set of learners, there still are individuals who may not benefit adequately from that statistically

significant group. It behooves the teacher to study individual pupils and attempt to find the procedure that best assists a pupil to achieve as well as possible in reading.

In addition to phonics and context clues use, there still are other methods of word recognition techniques that may be taught to learners. Thus use of picture clues, syllabication, structural analysis, and configuration clues may guide pupils to attain more adequately in reading. Pupils are individuals, not masses which can be taught the same way and expect the same rate of achievement form each. Reading teachers need to be highly knowledgeable of each pupil's learning style as well as knowledgeable about how each pupil learns best in reading. The focal point is the learner, not the group nor the teacher, in guiding optimal pupil achievement in reading.

There are older pupils, beyond the elementary level of schooling, who, perhaps, need teaching in word recognition skills. There are pupils who may not try or waste time in school and thus do not achieve will in school. Parents may not support the teacher or the school resulting in a pupil going through the different levels of schooling and not becoming adequately literate. A pupil might even graduate form high school, under these conditions, and not have gained the needed literacy to be employable.

In all situations, regardless of the difficulty involved, the reading teacher needs to provide interesting learning activities in reading to secure learner attention. The teacher also must attempt to motivate a pupil so that optimal energy is given in learning to read. Pupil purpose for reading needs to be developed. Individual differences need to be provided for so that each achieves as optimally as possible. I believe that to achieve optimally, pupils need to use diverse word recognition techniques, as tools, to unlock unknown words. Word recognition techniques are only that, tools to unlock unknown words, but these tools may be vital indeed so that independence in reading is an end result. Whole language procedures in reading may then be in evidence.

Mc Ninch and Gruber (1996) wrote in an introductory statement involving research conducted:

What children ultimately learn about literacy is heavily influenced by the expectations, skills, and concerns that parents, teachers, and principals share. All players in literacy development should possibly share common perceptions, especially in basic philosophical and pedagogical beliefs, if children are to receive coordinated instruction. Do parents, teachers, and principals agree on the basic reading issue of whole language versus traditional skill development?

McNinch and Gruber (1996) continue their writing by commenting on completed conducted research:

Parents, teachers, and principals each perceived that the development of literacy in young children is developed broadly both through traditional practices and whole language, emerging literacy, routines. The research groups find favor with traditional readiness activities as using flash cards, learning letter names, and learning the sounds made by letters. Also, they perceive that children learn literacy as an emerging awareness activity through such activities as repetitive listening, shared story telling, invented spelling, and creative "writing."

Emerging literacy is a mutual product of the home and school environment acting together with common interests. It does appear that the literacy providers, parents and teachers, are supporting each other in an eclectic approach to learning. Parents and teachers can fell free to use practices and strategies that draw form traditional practices as well as emerging, new approaches. Instruction with phonics can be blended with invented spelling, story telling can be integrated with oral reading, and creative writing can be matched with learning correct manuscript. It appears that teachers and parents are far more eclectic in their perceptions on how to develop literacy than they are married to to a specific approach. This liberal awareness is probably a healthy occurrence that signals professionalism on the part of teachers and involvement on the part of the parents.

Selected References

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